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A COLLEGE PRESIDENT SPEAKS OUT.

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DESPITE THE IMPORTANCE OF COURSES DESIGNED TO INTEREST THE ENGLISH MAJOR AND TO PREPARE FUTURE ENGLISH TEACHERS, ENGLISH DEPARTMENTS MUST CONCERN THEMSELVES MORE WITH THE NEEDS OF THE GENERAL STUDENT. DEPARTMENTS MUST ALMOST REVERSE THEIR CURRENT VALUE SYSTEM IF THEY HOPE TO SHAPE YOUNG MINDS AND PROVIDE A HUMANISTIC ALTERNATIVE TO THE NARROW PREMISES OF THE QUANTITATIVE DISCIPLINES. SINCE THE PRIMARY FUNCTION OF THE ENGLISH PROGRAM SHOULD BE TO EVOKE FROM STUDENTS WHATEVER IMAGINATIVE POWERS AND INTUITIVE PERCEPTIONS ARE POSSIBLE FOR THEM, TEACHERS SHOULD ASSERT THE RELEVANCE ENGLISH HAS TO HUMAN EXPERIENCE AND LEAVE THE PRECIOSITIES OF ITS PRACTICE TO ENGLISH MAJORS. FOR THE STUDENT WHO HAS NO INTENTION OF BECOMING AN ENGLISH MAJOR, SUCH AUTHORS AS NORMAN BROWN AND HANNAH ARENDT COME CLOSER TO REPRESENTING WHAT A DEPARTMENT MIGHT GIVE THAN DOES I.A. RICHARDS OR NORTHROP FRYE. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "THE ADE BULLETIN," NUMBER 15, OCTOBER 1967, PAGES 18-22. (BN)

A COLLEGE PRESIDENT SPEAKS OUT

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The title was supplied. Had I invented one myself, I might have taken a cue from Thomas Hogg and called this talk "Confessions of an Unrepentant Sinner," a title surely more piquant than the one supplied and just about equally descriptive. In sober fact, neither speaking out nor confessing seems to me the proper rhetorical mode for this occasion. The situation of English departments is probably largely invulnerable either to plaint or to pugnacity, especially from a college president.

All the same I shall venture some observations as a way of opening discussion, if nothing else. Having spent most of my adult life teaching, in English and other literary departments, from junior high school to graduate school, I can claim at least that measure of experience inevitable from exposure. Although I have administered this and that here and there for some time, like a good many other more or less literary people, my occupation as a full-time non-teaching officer is only two years old. The experience is fresh enough so that I still feel the change, and it may be <u>that</u>, more than anything else, that gives point to what I intend to say. I have not yet forgotten the attitudes and responses of the department member, but I have of necessity discovered a somewhat different perspective.

Memory was stirred and the new perspective stimulated recently when I came across the bulletin of a department chairman to department members--obviously not from Union College and obviously not from any college or university represented here. I quote only the opening sentence: "The principal concerns of the English Department are graduate work, the undergraduate major, and the freshman humanities course." I do not like to believe that I would have accepted that statement three years ago, but perhaps I would have done so. In any event, I do not accept it now. I would even go so far as to say that insofar as this can be taken as an acceptable prime proposition for an English Department it is notice of intention to survive at any cost. Without imputing anything to that statement but what it says--for instance, taking no note at all of the order in which the principal concerns are named--I find it a proposition from which the inferences can only be disastrous for education and, eventually, for the discipline as well.

Would I say the same if the statement came from a chemistry department or a department of civil engineering? No, I would not. I might then think the statement somewhat benighted, but I would not think it seriously misleading. Why not? The reason is simple enough, even though it has been steadily obscured in the past fifty years, first, by the pervasiveness of empiricism and scientific positivism, and second, by the instinct for self-preservation among humanists. The reason is that the matter dealt with by the chemistry department and the matter dealt with by the civil engineering department are different from the matter dealt with by the English department: different in kind, different in the uses to which the matter can be put, different in the tests to be applied to it. To speak as this bulletin speaks of the "principal concerns" is to ignore the difference.

It is clear enough to me why the difference is so readily ignored, clear--I suppose--because I have now bitten into the fruit of a new tree of knowledge. The necessary specialism of our society has both produced and resulted from specialism in higher education. Directly and not-so-directly, the rewards of society, especially at the lower and the median levels, go to the specialist; and our academic structure, bourgeois to the core, shapes itself to those rewards. Politically it is wise to ignore differ-

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ences, in the departmental office as quickly as in the presidential one, because comparable patterns, even if they are entirely superficial, provide the simplest way of equalizing the dissimilar.

Consider for a moment what an English department's "principal concerns" would be if no one were needed to <u>teach</u> English. What would be left of the present undergraduate major or of graduate study? The question is entirely serious, and any serious answer, I think, will reveal at least that professionalism--specialism, willy-nilly--now dominates both. English departments prize most those students who most handsomely fulfill professional expectations: they are the ones most likely to get the strong recommendations from college departments and the ones most likely to receive scholarships, travelling fellowships, and appointments as tutors and graduate assistants in university departments. It is senseless, I think, to quarrel with the logic of this patronage, but it is also foolish to overlook the premises for it. The truth is that English teachers, for school and college, are needed, and English departments feel an obligation to produce them. The "primary concerns" of their major and graduate programs are to do exactly that.

If we accept this prime proposition, we can deal administratively with the English department as with any other. Depending on the philosophy that governs the institution, we can either let it slug out its position in a free market or we can directly and indirectly subsidize it on the grounds that a respectable institution has to have an English department, whether it has one in Classics or not, or that the department has to be given at least minimal status or the institution won't have enough people on hand to teach the courses generally acclaimed as liberally educative. That is, we can treat it completely as we would any other admittedly professional department, or we can give it the status of a professional department but calculate, in our heart of hearts, that it is a "service" department in fact and is to be treated as professional only in order to keep its services intact. The consequences seem to me almost equally disastrous for both procedures. The service department with professional status--eighty majors in English against two thousand in business administration, for instance--inevitably develops galloping paranoia; the result of that is mandarinism of the most obvious kinds. From what I have observed, the smaller the department and the lower the number of majors in proportion to the enrollment of the entire college, the greater the rigidity and sense of virtue. Kittredge and Lowes are seldom quoted or mentioned at Harvard, but their names still come trippingly from the tongue of the English professor at Oshkosh. The service department with professional status has to stand on its dignity in order to assure itself that size is inversely proportional to value. The truly professional English department with hundreds of majors has no such worries; it simply plays a straightforward competitive role, measuring its output as any other department does, making its claim to budgetary allotments, and asking a sizable additional dollop for the ancillary services it performs in taking care of umpteen hundreds of underclassmen in freshman humanities and in admitting some cadres of experimenting upperclassmen to its larger lecture courses.

What gets left out in both arrangements is what ought most to be in, the concern for English as one of the humanities and for the humanities as an experience and a discipline very important to the education of a man and very different from other parts of that education. If you take seriously my earlier question--what would be left of the present undergraduate major or of graduate study if there were no need to prepare teachers of English?--you get at least some glimpse of the perspective from which an administrator is almost bound to look at the curriculum. It is probably self-serving to say that he looks at it--in his best moments, anyway--as the student looks at it; in any event, his way of putting the question might be to ask: What does an English department really have to offer to the college student who has no intention of becoming an English teacher?

In the time of Babbitt and Paul Elmer More, the answer to that question was stoutly delivered. But if any one thing has been made clear to us in the past fifty years it

is that the hopes of the so-called "new humanists" have come to little or nothing, particularly their hopes for the development of literary disciplines in a particular direction. What they claimed to offer the college student was a sustaining culture, one capable of taking the place of religious orthodoxies. Their literary homiletics read today like essays from an entirely different world, and they were, in fact, the final enunciations of a different world, one reaching its end after twenty-two or twenty-three centuries of existence.

In its place has come a world with a radically different expectation and postulate, both of which have captivated the literary disciplines almost as much as others. The main expectation of any serious study today is that it be definite and precise, if not utterly subject to empirical verification or logical resolution. The main postulate is that whatever does not submit itself to such verification or resolution, though it may add grace and color to existence, has and deserves to have less authority among serious men than those disciplines which may lay claim to either or both. If the literary disciplines have not been so completely captured as others by this expectation and this postulate, it is mainly because they are compounded of stuff that is rather intractable, not because humanists have been unwilling to be captured.

The various critical schools that have followed the new humanism look, in perspective, like a series of efforts, desperate though gallant, to find passage out of a cul de sac. Art-for-art's sake may be the only defensible literary doctrine for a culture that has philosophical materialism at its root, and philosophical materialism is the only tolerable position for the twentieth-century empirical scientist, whatever his temperamental aversion to it may be. Yet neither the gentle advocacy of E. M. Forster nor the brusque polemic and practice of Vladimir Nabokov--to name only two defenders of the art-for-art's-sake doctrine--persuade me that treating literature solely, or even mainly, as a matter of form fully realizes its virtues as a part of education. For most college students, literature becomes rich and fruitful more by its relatedness to the rest of life than by its dissociation from it as an exercise in verbal cunning. Though it is true that manner alone makes matter literary, it is also true that the matter counts, counts so much that where it is trivial or dull no amount of analyt cal ingenuity in the teacher-critic can make it rewarding to the general student.

What he needs--that general student--from the English teacher is the assurance and evidence that literature is bread and cake for him, not frosting and marmalade. Remote as they are from the accepted protagonists, it seems to me that Norman Brown and Hannah Arendt--to name very different outriders--come closer to representing what an English department might give to a college student who has no intention of becoming an English teacher than does I. A. Richards or Northrop Frye. That is surely a scandalous thing to say and will serve to give some of you comfort since it so clearly indicates my benightedness and thereby makes all my observations risible. Yet I think I have a point. The "outriders" make bold attempts to grapple with all possible reaches of their respective disciplines; the orthodoctors are mainly inclined to establish regularities and limits within them. It appears to me that, unless one is willing to accept the art-for-art's-sake doctrine as both necessary and sufficient, as I am not, some such bold breach of limits and rupture of regularities as Brown and Arendt achieve must take place in the activity of English departments if they are to contribute distinctively and richly to the education of college students today.

If Douglas Bush were here, he would ask wryly if Milton or Wordsworth might not serve at least as well as Brown and Arendt; the answer is that any unmediated vision will serve better than a mediated one--for those who have eyes to see. But interpretation, in literature as in everything else, has made pupils of us all, and one may almost as soon expect a student to observe pressure without a meter or electrons without an electronoscope as to expect one to see Shelley plain. What the English department can best do for most students, it seems to me, is assert the relevance it genuinely has to human experience and leave the preciosities of its practice to its "majors," to those

who intend honestly to become masters of the bead game, in Hesse's metaphor.

From one point of view the whole series of fallacies made popular by Messrs. Wimsatt, Beardsley, and others represents an effort to bring some kind of order and stability to literary criticism; it was also meant, I suppose, to purify the language of the tribe. Its effect, however, was to decimate the tribe in order to achieve the purification; the elect bring the game to perfection, hoi polloi ignore first the game and then the matter of the game. Equally damaging, the game so preoccupies the players that all but the sages among them more and more incline to mistake ingenuity for excellence and to exert as much attention on the trivial as on the lasting.

Perhaps I exaggerate--but not much. What distresses me most, as i think about the intellectual and spiritual needs of the students at Union College, and presumably, at most others, is that English departments go so short a distance toward meeting those needs for most. This is a great pity, for the evidence is overwhelming that, given half a chance, a great number of students would find a larger part of their education through the humanities if they could. They indicate their interest and their need by enrolling in English classes wherever they sense an opening to windward, and they have been doing so for decades. Yet the sober fact is that, as college graduates, they appear to have little of their collegiate literary experience to carry out with them. Perhaps they have been humanized by it, yet quite clearly most of them are graduated with little more sense of literature as a central force in thier lives: how else can one explain the absence of books in their homes and the lack of good bookstores even in flourishing towns and cities?

The argument I most often hear from the scientists and the engineers on my own campus when students transfer from their fields to others is that the going is too tough for them so they move to an easier climate. The astonishing thing is that I hear people in the humanities say the same thing about them. Sometimes I conjure up a vision of homeless thousands, collegiate nomads, ejected from Israel and hovering disconsolately near its borders or wandering aimlessly over Arab sands, a multitude of Ishmaels. Science is too analytical and precise for them; it is therefore to be concluded that if they find comfort or even tolerance elsewhere their hosts are by definition imprecise and unanalytical. Now instead of admitting--or even welcoming--such a charge, the average (and above average?) English department immediately sets out to demonstrate that it is as precise and analytical, in its own sweet fashion, as physics or experimental psychology.

What would happen if an English department, instead of fighting fire with fire, were to advertise that its strength lay in its capacity to educate by a means other than analytical, that its virtue lay in studied imprecision? What would happen were the chairman of an English department to issue a bulletin to his department members saying, "The primary concern of this department is to make up for the motor rigidities induced by overexposure to the precise and analytical disciplines; its secondary concern is to prepare teachers who can promote the primary concern without succumbing to solipsism and silliness"?

From scandal to sentiment, you may say, and I reply that such is the course of Tristram Shandy, no model for Archimedes and none for Newman, either, but one with more than casual possibilities for hundreds of students on every campus whose minds suffer far more from the ruts of absorbed positivism than from any inflammation produced by contact with the unpredictable. In short, and less rhetorically, I believe that English departments must almost reverse their current value system if they hope to participate vigorously not only in the undergraduate curriculum but in the shaping of young minds. As long as they make their principal concern the purveying of knowledge and at the same time attempt to treat that knowledge as similar in kind to the knowledge purveyed in the sciences, they will come out second best. The English department can be concerned only peripherally with knowledge in that sense; and only peripherally can it be concerned with the perpetuation of a culture or the transmission of moral principles. Its "primary function," I believe, must be to evoke in and from students whatever latent sensibilities they have, whatever powers to imagine forms and acts beyond their own performing, whatever intuitive perceptions are possible for them: in short, to increase the vitality

of their lives by adding a dimension to their living.

This cannot be done by cheapening the fare or converting the instruction from pedantic to histrionic. Nor can it be done by separating the literary work from everything but its own skin. Accurate reading requires not only sound philology but a reasonable amount of awareness of the way things are. It takes a good bit more than an eye for language to recognize that most of Cooper's women--and some of Henry James's men--are sappy as maples; and no nimble literary acrostic will do half so much for the reading of Donne as the discovery that his profane and holy passions have corollaries close at home.

It is the obligation of a critic to propose, and I shall do so, exercising that heady privilege of a college president, the airy creation of radical reform unencumbered by the responsibility for execution. I would propose that English departments think of all their formal courses as public events, created for the common weal and taught so that the commonwealth may profit from them. I would propose that the serious work of the preparation of disciples who are late to assume the mantle be almost entirely limited to tutorial exericse, as rigorous as one could make it. I would propose that philology and grammar and rhetoric be both common offerings and tutorial exactions and that, at every opportunity, the arts of composition--in any media--be associated with those of reception. Above all, I would propose that English departments give serious meaning to the not-so-serious remark of Petronius' clown, "nihil humani a me alienum puto." Our colleges and universities can no more afford to have their English departments out of the main stream than the world can afford to have our students' responses shaped entirely by the limited glosses and narrow premises of the quantitative disciplines. To do as much as they are needed to do, English departments must run the risks that derive from being true to the intractable matter of their discipline. Only if they run those risks do they stand any chance of achieving that experiential summum bonum of the age--making a computer stammer.

I once taught All for Love so painstakingly that I had almost no time left in which to teach Antony and Cleopatra at all. As a result, all except one of my students preferred the worse to the better. After so gross a mistake, who can regret that I became an administrator or censure me for pointing out to others the error of ways I have abandoned?

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